



Chapter 18

Tumbleweed Drops and Key Grabs

After the Roadrunner and Coyote Races left the launch field at the Albuquerque International Hot Air Balloon Fiesta the Tumbleweed Drop followed. A large white cross was laid out in the middle of the field and an area around it was fenced to keep the spectators back from the target. The competing balloons were supposed to launch between two and three miles away from this cross, fly back to it, and drop a tumbleweed. When you think about the fact that we have no way to control which way a balloon flies, this may seem a little absurd. All we can do is try to figure which way the wind is blowing and head in the opposite direction, launch the balloon, and try to float back across the target. If Mother Nature is cooperating, we can usually find some different layers of air that may push the balloon in different directions. Otherwise it is much like throwing a twig into a running stream. The balloon just goes where the air currents happen to take it.

I usually stayed on the field until after some of the roadrunners and coyotes had launched to see the direction they headed. We had laid out a large map of the area on the hood of the truck and watched a pretty polka dot roadrunner balloon headed south. The map had two large circles drawn on it, with the cross as the center. The first circle was drawn two miles out from the center of the cross and the second circle was three miles.

"He looks like he's headed toward downtown," Ken pointed to a section of the map.

"Yeah, the general wind direction seems to be southwest."

"Where will we launch?"

"We'll head north to start with. Once we get up around the power plant I'll check the wind direction again." I pointed to an area on the map between the two circles. "This is an open field and maybe we can launch there."

The crew piled into the back of the truck and we headed for the frontage road. Weekdays events at the Fiesta were fun. There were balloon races early in the morning and later a stunt plane flew an exhibition. Ultralight aircraft flew in between and all around the field; vendors set up shops to sell everything from hot dogs to stained-glass balloons. The traffic was much less than on the weekends, but there were still plenty of spectators. As we drove down the dusty access road, they waved and shouted "GOOD LUCK." Several other crews were headed in the same direction, and we exchanged good-natured comments among ourselves. We passed by a huge tent, filled with a large display of balloon gondolas and other balloon gear. A Playboy Bunny, in the usual skimpy costume, wandered among the gondolas. I slowed the pickup down and Judy jabbed me playfully in the ribs.

"Aw, come on, I was just slowing down for the benefit of the boys in the back," I protested.

"Sure—sure! That's why you were looking so hard. Just keep your eyes on the road."

Before we launched we had to find a tumbleweed. In New Mexico that really isn't very hard, but just any old tumbleweed won't do. It should have character. It had to be green and round, hopefully very fat and heavy. Phil spotted a likely candidate on the side of the road and he and Roy ran to get it. It was a honey about three feet across. Roy stretched out in the sand and wiggled under one edge to cut the stem with a pocket knife. For those of you who haven't seen one of these things, the entire weed grows out from a central stem. Its side branches lay flat against the ground and are covered with stickers. From there the other branches on the stem form a dense rounded shape that defies any attempt to reach down through them. The only way to get to the stem is to lift up on the bottom branches and crawl under one edge. I could hear Roy grunt and grumble as he sawed at the stem. Finally the

weed came loose and he stood up rubbing his arm where the stickers on the branches had scratched his skin.

"I didn't think they would be that sharp when they were green."

"Wait'll you try and pick it up. They weigh about thirty pounds when they're that size," Phil grinned.

"Come on, you guys. Let's get going. We've got a race to run." They gingerly picked the weed up and tied it to the side of the pickup with a piece of wire.

The open area we had picked out on the map was crowded with other balloonists by the time we arrived. And we could see it wasn't the only area being used. Balloons were inflating in several small areas scattered out over three or four miles. We could even see a few launching in the valley to the west. In the next two hours, about 150 balloons would launch somewhere in the area. Strategies in this competition varied. Some balloonists figured on flying in at a low altitude until they reached the general area of the target. Others probably planned on going up to a relatively high altitude, approaching from a different direction, and then dropping down as they approached the target. The whole thing was a little bit of science and a lot of guesswork.

"This place looks pretty crowded," Charlotte commented. "We'll have to wait in line just to get a spot."

"Don't get your feathers in an uproar," I said. "Let's watch a couple of them take off. I think the wind has shifted somewhat."

"How can you tell?" Ken asked.

"Look at the steam coming off the power plant. When we left the field it was drifting southwest. Now it seems to be heading more to the south."

Sure enough, two balloons took off and headed south at an angle that would carry them east of the target. I watched them for a while as they climbed higher to try to find an air-stream that would carry them back over the target area. It soon became apparent they weren't going to make it so I drove the pickup west about a mile and watched the steam coming off the power plant again. It seemed to be holding steady.

"Let's set her up over there." I pointed to a flat area west of the street where we were parked.

"You know, you're getting pretty sneaky in your old age," my dad commented as we drove across the field.

"I'll accept that as a compliment after we get airborne. The wind could change again and we could look just as foolish as those people over there."

The inflation and launch went smoothly. Once we were in the air, I climbed quickly to check the wind directions at different altitudes. We were lucky. It appeared the wind patterns were holding and we could steer for the target. Charlotte was riding with me. She had tied the tumbleweed to the side of the gondola and would drop it on my signal. We had also tied a large tag on the tumbleweed, giving the name and number of our balloon.

I settled into the familiar pattern: move up a couple of hundred feet and head one direction; descend about 150 feet and head a little different direction. We zigzagged our way toward the target adjusting Sundancer's flight every few minutes. As we approached the field other balloons joined us. Even though they had launched from several different points, they were doing the same thing I was—using the currents of air at different altitudes to guide the balloon over the target. We watched several drop their tumbleweeds.

"The tumbleweeds seem to be drifting to the east," Charlotte noted. "They sure drop like a rock."

"I wouldn't want to have one land on me. Look at the people get out of the way as they come down. I think there must be a breeze goin' east at about fifty feet above the ground."

"We seem to be doin' all right if we can keep going the same direction."

"Don't speak too soon. I think our airstream just stopped."

Sundancer hung in the sky about 100 yards from the target. We could see our crew at the edge of the crowd; the yellow T-shirts stood out like flags. I ascended and then descended about 200 feet several times to try to find an air current that would carry us over the target. Descending was OK, but every time we went up the balloon headed away from the target, not toward it. Nothing I did seemed to help. It was just starting to look like we should give up when Sundancer started to move toward the target very slowly in an air layer that was about

300 feet above the ground. This was all right except that, according to the rules, I had to be at least 500 feet above the ground before I could drop the tumbleweed, and that was the altitude where the wind was carrying us away from the field.

"What do we do now?" Charlotte asked.

"I guess we just ride it in this way, then ascend quickly and try to dump the tumbleweed as soon as we reach 500 feet, but before we get carried too far away."

The minutes passed in slow motion as we inched our way toward the target on the field ahead. The people on the ground cheered; if enthusiasm counted, we'd have been drawn to the target like a magnet. Instead, the wind shifted a little more and Sundancer began moving slightly to the right of the target. It was tempting to go up to see if the wind current above had also changed, but when I looked around at the other balloons in the area none of them seemed to be improving their positions any more than I was. Darn, it was nerve-racking to be moving so slowly. Finally it looked like we were as close as we were going to get and I poured heat into the envelope and watched the altimeter.

"Turn it loose," I said as we passed 500 feet and Charlotte let go of the wire and we watched the tumbleweed plunge toward the ground. People scurried to get out of the way. It hit with a large puff of dust and Phil ran over to mark the point for the official.

"Not very good," I grumbled. "Well, let's go on up and catch a wind and see where we can land." I felt it wasn't very good as tumbleweed drops go. The weed had hit about ninety feet from the center of the cross. As it turned out, it was still good enough for third place. Most of the balloons had fared even worse.

Luck plays a strong part in all balloon competitions, but particularly in this kind of event. You can be the most skilled pilot in the world, yet the wind can change or quit and knock you out of contention. No one knows this better than the people who have won cars in the Wednesday Key Grab at the Fiesta.

In this event a set of car keys is taped to the top of a twenty-foot pole. The launch rules are the same as for the Tumbleweed Drop—any place between two and three miles. You can't

touch the ground until after you grab the keys and you must keep both feet on the bottom of the gondola when you make a grab for them. This is to keep people from hanging over the side and falling out of the gondola. Otherwise, get the keys and you get to keep the car.

I haven't won a car yet. I guess I could tell a story about how someone else got the keys, but that's old hat—like describing the big fish someone else caught. One time I got within twenty-five feet, but that really doesn't count. Of course, getting within three inches isn't any better if you sail on by without getting that precious piece of metal in your hand. Over the years I've watched balloons that weren't even close get bumped right into the pole or balloons that were right on target get bumped away. I've seen people holler and yell and cry and laugh. Mostly, though I've watched them fly by like us with arms outstretched and a forlorn look on their faces as their reach wasn't quite long enough. One year, we even watched George come in right behind the balloon that got the keys. He slapped the pole as he went by—he was that close, just a little too late.

I keep telling myself that it's all in fun, and it is, and I still keep on competing. When I win or come close, I grin and congratulate myself on how well I can fly. In the back of my mind I still know Lady Luck played her part and that keeps me from getting too smug. By now, I hope I've convinced you that if winning were a big thing in hot air balloon events, most people wouldn't even come. Winning is fun, but the big thing is to fly. If the two happen to come together, it's great. But if they don't, no one gets very bent out of shape. Maybe next year I'll win that car or that Coyote and Roadrunner Race or that Tumbleweed Drop at the Fiesta. Most likely I won't, but I'll be there flying.